

Elihu Coleman House  
Nantucket, Massachusetts

MASS-2-86 HABS

MASS.

10-NANT

4

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS  
District of Massachusetts

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Frank Chouteau Brown, District Officer  
Boston, Massachusetts

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. MASS-2-86

## ELIHU COLEMAN HOMESTEAD

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Location: Hawthorne Lane, off Madaket Road (in section known as Mill Brook Country, about two miles west of the Town), Nantucket, Massachusetts. Latitude: 41° 16' 56" N. Longitude: 70° 09' 34" W.

Present Owner: Granger H. Frost

Present Occupant: Frost family

Present Use: Summer occupancy

Brief Statement of Significance: The only house still standing on the site of the old settlement of Sherburne, it is an excellent example of early eighteenth century Nantucket architecture.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

## 1. Original and subsequent owners:

- 1722 -- Elihu Coleman.
- 1789 -- On Elihu Coleman's death the property passed to his son William Coleman.
- 1801 -- Heirs of William Coleman.
- 1861 -- Gilbert Coffin, who had acquired the property from the other heirs of William Coleman. Gilbert Coffin was the son of Micajah and Abigail (Coleman) Coffin.
- 1862 -- William Hosier. The entire homestead was purchased by a series of deeds from the three heirs of Gilbert Coffin, namely: William B. Coffin, Paul Coffin and Benjamin S. Coffin; ownership of the house passed out of the family of Elihu Coleman for the first time.
- 1899 -- Town of Nantucket. William Hosier deeded the property "known as the Hosier Farm in Mill Brook Country" to the Town with the hope that it might be kept as a memorial to Elihu Coleman. This did not work out and the Town, at the Annual Town Meeting in 1913 voted to sell the property.
- 1913 -- Annie Barker Folger bought "the homestead place of the late Elihu Coleman" for \$450.
- 1919 -- William H. Ring purchased property.
- 1921 -- Rose Ring Forbes. Mrs. Forbes Land Courted in 1929 and in 1934 it was put in the names of Rose

Ring Forbes and Elizabeth W. Kimball.  
1939 -- Elizabeth H. Blair purchased property.  
1961 to date -- Granger Hollister Frost purchased  
property from his mother, Mrs. Blair.

2. Date of erection: It is agreed by historians that the house was built in 1722. Dr. Will Gardner in The Coffin Saga states that Elihu Coleman was twenty-two years of age when he built the house of his dreams.
3. Architect: None. The house was planned and built by Elihu Coleman, who was a carpenter and builder by trade. Christopher Coffin Hussey in Talks About Old Nantucket, 1901, wrote that the owner, as a house builder, was well ahead of his times, although without much book lore.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: It is of massive construction, with the corner-posts, girts and summers all visible. Early historians believed that timber from native trees was used, but this has not been verified, and is indeed doubtful. It is of the lean-to type. It has two stories on the front which faces south, with the north roof sloping to one story in the rear. On each side of the huge central chimney are large rooms, each with a wide fireplace. The kitchen one projects into the room about 6'6" and beside the fireplace is a place for heating water. It is thought that the bricks for the fireplace were made from clay from the pits on the Island which were opened in 1720, a few years before the house was built. The fireplace in the keeping-room is the largest on the Island, being 9 1/2' wide, and one can easily step into it and look up to the sky.

There are square panes of glass and sash windows instead of the diamond panes and small casements of the Jethro Coffin House (HABS No. MASS-919) on Sunset Hill. It also has an overhanging cornice.

On the interior, the woodwork suggests the work of a ship's carpenter -- doors with slanting tops, and beams supported by "knees," which were brackets formed by the trunk and root of a white oak; also lap sheathing on the sides to keep out the weather. It is said that the oak corner posts become so toughened by time that it is impossible to drive a nail into them. The floor boards of the rooms on the first floor are lower than the sills.

Several interesting details are the decorated "H" hinges, the front door called the "Christian door" because the panels form a cross, the latch and latch-string on all the doors, the ventilator over the door of the parlor to let heat upstairs, the small cupboard beside the big

fireplace in the keeping room, a "Bible box" where presumably the family Bible was kept, the wide floor boards, some measuring as much as 22" across. Many of the roof boards are fully as wide, and the kitchen door has a panel 25" in width.

5. Alterations and additions: The arrangements of the interior have been little changed and the big kitchen fireplace with oven in the back remains as it was. The chimney bricks, laid with island clay and moistened seashells, are intact. The partition has been removed between the kitchen and the adjoining "borning room," the household maternity ward.

In 1899 the property was willed by William Hosier to the Town of Nantucket with the idea that it should be preserved as a memorial to Elihu Coleman. Nothing came of this and it remained deserted for years with windows boarded up, birds nesting in the chimney and upstairs rooms, tall weeds outside, and looking like a haunted house. Miss Annie Barker Folger, an artist, bought the house from the Town to save it from desecration, and began the work of restoration. From her it came into ownership of Mrs. Rose Ring Forbes, who carried on this work, much of it with her own hands. When Mrs. Walter D. Blair bought the house in 1939 the restoration was completed.

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: As mentioned above, this is the only house still standing on the site of the old settlement of Sherburne. Before the great keeping-room fireplace, Elihu Coleman, a minister of the Society of Friends, as his mother had been before him, wrote one of the first protests by a Quaker in New England "against that Anti-Christian Practice of Making Slaves of Men." This was published in 1730. It made no great impression in its time, but over a hundred years later, when the issue had become more acute, the abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, made a pilgrimage to this house as to a sacred shrine. The manuscript of this tract against slavery, written in 1729 and published the next year, is in possession of the Nantucket Historical Association.

Mrs. Blair took a great deal of interest in the heather growing on the Island of Nantucket, originally brought here in 1875 by Henry Coffin when he planted forty thousand pines and larches at the Miacomet section. These came over from the British Isles. The heather was discovered by his daughter, Susan Coffin, growing among the pines where the seeds or small plants of heather had unknowingly been scattered, taken root and flourished. Mrs. Blair cultivated more than twenty-five hybrid heaths around the Elihu Coleman house, always giving special care to

the three type heathers which belong to the flora of the Island.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Geographic Magazine, April 1944 (view of interior); New Bedford Standard Times, February 24, 1957 (photograph of summer kitchen).

2. Bibliography:

- Chamberlain, Samuel. Nantucket, a photographic sketchbook. New York: Hastings House, 1955.
- Fowlkes, George Allen. A Mirror of Nantucket, an Architectural History of the Island, 1686-1850. New Jersey, 1959. (includes two side views and one front view)
- Frost, Elizabeth Hollister. This Side of Land. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1942.
- Gardner, William Edward. The Coffin Saga: Nantucket's Story, from Settlement to Summer's Visitors. Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1949. (includes photograph of side of house)
- Starbuck, Alexander. The History of Nantucket, County, Island, and Town. Boston: C. E. Goodspeed and Co., 1924. (includes old photograph before restoration)
- Stevens, William Oliver. Nantucket, the Far-Away Island. New York: Dodd and Mead and Co., 1936. (includes drawings of kitchen fireplace and homestead)
- Worth, Henry Barnard. Nantucket Lands and Land Owners. Nantucket Historical Association Bulletin, Vol. II, No. 4, 1904, pp. 251-252.

Prepared by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin  
Nantucket, Massachusetts  
November, 1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Excellent example of an early eighteenth century wood frame and shingle lean-to house; two stories with ell, central chimney.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent; minor and tasteful modification and restoration of the original fabric.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 37' - 6" by 46' - 6" including ell.
2. Foundations: Wood sleepers set into dry sand.
3. Wall construction: Wood frame, weathered 4" - 5" exposure cedar shingles nailed on 1" horizontal beveled edge wood sheathing, corner boards.
4. Structural system: Post and lintel platform system, braced frame with gunstock posts, sills, girts, summer beams, plates exposed to the interior; structural members have chamfered edges, adze marks; mortise and tenon joinery, treenail and iron fasteners.
5. Chimneys:
  - a. Central chimney: Brick, T-shaped in plan with decorative panel on south side; multiflue, corbelled necking and cap; stuccoed surface in attic.
  - b. Chimney in ell: Brick with cement wash, brick necking and cowl, single flue; brick drip course near roof line.
6. Stoops: Irregular field stone pavers at entrances.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: South (front) doorway has simple wood board trim and drip; outer door is of vertical board exterior, horizontal board at interior surface; strap iron hinges and cast iron pintles, "Nantucket" iron and wood latch; in-swinging screen door; similar exterior doors at other entrances.
  - b. Windows: Single hung windows, six-over-six, eight-over-twelve, six-over-twelve sash fixed and casement windows; projecting plank window frames, mortise and

tenon construction with dowel fasteners,  
cyma reversa profile at head, beaded edge  
at jamb.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape and covering: Unequal gable or "salt-box" roofs on house and ell, asbestos shingles on roof boards paralleling slope of roof nailed to purlins.
- b. Framing: Five bays, rafters and purlins, sheathing parallel to roof slope, mortise and tenon, treenail fasteners.
- c. Scuttle in north slope of roof covered over; ladder and framing in place.
- d. Cornice, eaves: Boxed eave at south elevation; barge boards and fascia elsewhere; heads of windows in south elevation project into fascia below boxed eave and into fascia at north elevation and in ell.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: Entry from south doorway, stairway to second floor; parlor to southwest, old kitchen or "hall" to southeast; winter kitchen pantry, burning room and stairway to circular root cellar and to upper portion of lean-to (partition and doorway between burning room and winter kitchen removed); summer kitchen appendage at northeast corner.
- b. Second floor: Stairhall between bedrooms or "chambers" at southeast and southwest; two bedrooms, two baths. Bedroom and dressing room in upper part of lean-to.
- c. Attic: Unfinished space below roof, stairs from second floor.

2. Stairway:

- a. Staircase at south entry: U-shaped staircase of nine winders, closet off southeast room and under staircase used for wood, storage, board and batten partition; stair continues to attic ell-shaped with winders.
- b. Staircase from kitchen to bedroom in lean-to and to root cellar: L-shaped staircase of seven winders up to second floor. Ladder stair to root cellar.

3. Flooring: Wood boards of various widths to 25", stained dark brown; all floor surfaces are uneven due to settlement

or construction practices.

4. Wall and ceiling finishes: Plaster painted white and/or board and batten partitions stained dark brown.
5. Doorways and doors: Simple battens ovolo profile used as trim of some doorways, simple boards at jambs elsewhere; two-panel doors feather edged outside; dowel fasteners, plane marks show on most surfaces.
6. Decorative features and trim: Typical early eighteenth century Nantucket house noted for its simplicity, with decoration limited to articulation of structural systems utilitarian trim of door and window panes, combinations of simple molding profiles to form fireplace mantles, corner cabinet of vertical boards and batten in parlor, cupboard to left of fireplace.
7. Notable hardware: H-hinges, "Nantucket" latches of wood, bar, guides and catch, wrought iron pulls and thumb latches, miscellaneous wood knobs and pegs, typical wood latch, guide and keep.
8. Lighting: Modern electric; miscellaneous iron and wood hooks, spikes and staples indicate extensive use of lamps, lanterns, and sconces.
9. Heating and cooking: No modern heating system; fireplaces in principal rooms of first floor, southeast bedroom, and in summer kitchen.
  - a. Southeast room fireplace: Brick hearth reveals and back, herringbone pattern panel for fireback, ledge at rear wall above fireback, recess in left corner, oak lintel, wood trammel in throat of chimney, brick and wood board inserts above opening.
  - b. Fireplace in southwest room: Brick hearth, reveals, recess in rear wall; oven in kitchen fireplaces limits opening; stepped molded or "ship's keel" mouth.
  - c. Winter kitchen fireplace: Brick hearth, reveals and back, ledge and bee-hive oven in rear wall, wood trammel in chimney throat, cooking crane and hardware.
  - d. Kitchen shed fireplace: Brick and concrete hearth, brick reveals and back, strap iron lintel, iron pot set into masonry base with fireplace below with flue let into principal fireplace flue.
  - e. Fireplace in southeast room, second floor: Brick construction (closed out).



- D. Site and Surroundings: The Elihu Coleman Homestead is located on a forty acre site southwest of Nantucket on the edge of the Mill Brook Swamp. Hawthorne Lane is to the north and east, the Nantucket-Madaket road is to the north. A barn remodelled as a guest house and studio and a garage are to the southwest. The landscaping includes varieties of heather, hawthorn, a small lily pond, and cleared areas and paths in the natural vegetation of low shrubs and trees.

Prepared by F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A.  
Nantucket, Massachusetts  
August, 1971

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared for the Historic American Buildings Survey project on Nantucket, Massachusetts. They are part of a continuing HABS comprehensive survey of the early architecture and urban design of Nantucket financed by a grant from the Nantucket Historical Trust.

The project was under the general supervision of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Measured drawings were made by Thomas M. Stetson, George Oman, and W. J. Lively, Works Progress Administration Official Project No. 265-6907. Historical information was provided by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin of Nantucket, Massachusetts. Architectural description was prepared by Professor F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A., (University of Florida). Photographs are by Cortlandt V. D. Hubbard of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The material was edited for deposit in the Library of Congress by Mrs. Constance Werner Ramirez, July 1971.

ADDENDUM TO  
ELIHU COLEMAN HOUSE  
Hawthorne Lane  
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Massachusetts

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